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Sons of the Soil Conflicts

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Sons of the soil conflicts are a global issue. It is vital that policymakers and scholars understand the character, causes and consequences of these conflicts.

What are Sons of the Soil (SoS) conflicts?

First introduced by Myron Weiner in his seminal 1978 work on native vs. non-native ethnic violence in India, the concept of SoS conflict is now widely employed to describe outbreaks of nativist violence across the Global South and Global North. The geographical range of SoS conflict underscores its global significance. Cases of SoS conflict have occurred in as diverse places as China, Democratic Republic of Congo, former Soviet Republics, India and OECD countries. Beyond the significance of its global distribution, is the alarming *frequency* of such conflicts. As one influential study finds, nearly a third of all 'ethnic civil wars' fought between 1945 and 2008 can be characterized as SoS conflicts.

How can we define what constitutes a SoS conflict? Unlike the explosive debates surrounding international or cross-border immigration, SoS conflict pit local/native/indigenous populations against *domestic* migrant/non-native/non-indigenous populations. As the aforementioned study suggests, these conflicts involve "conflict between members of a minority ethnic group concentrated in some region of a country, and relatively recent, ethnically distinct migrants to this region from other parts of the same country."

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The self-fashioned 'indigenous' population legitimizes its wide-ranging claims through its ancestral and/or longstanding attachment to the specific territory. Such claims serve to undermine the attempts of those who are 'not of the soil' to benefit from the economic, social and/or political opportunities otherwise available to them in the host communities. This sets the stage for the potential escalation of conflict as cleavages widen and political entrepreneurs seize on the opportunity to instrumentalise grievances to their advantage.

Given the ethnic dimensions and violence surrounding many SoS conflicts, they are often conceptualised as a subset of 'ethnic conflict' or 'civil war'. This is somewhat problematic as SoS conflict represent a distinct form of conflict. To be sure, ethnicity is often central to the wider conflict. Yet as a survey of the literature on SoS notes: to "frame the debate in terms of one ethnic group versus another glosses over an important fact: such conflicts involve, first and foremost, groups that consider themselves to be locals of the land — often sharing ethnic characteristics — and those that are considered and consider themselves to be migrants or non-locals." In other words, SoS conflicts are unique in that they are motivated by groups' ideational attachment to place — attachments that cannot be broken between the putative 'son' and the sacrosanct 'soil'.

Moreover, the concept of civil wars is also inappropriate for capturing the unique dynamics of SoS conflicts. Whereas civil wars tend to be defined as highly lethal conflicts pitting non-state actors against the state, SoS conflicts rarely reach the same threshold of casualties as civil wars. What's more, they also pit *non-state groups* (i.e. migrants and indigenous populations) against one another. While this does not preclude such conflicts from having a strong connection with the state, they are nonetheless distinct from civil wars, which

by definition involve combat between the state and a non-state armed group (or groups). In sum, the unique characteristics surrounding SoS conflict underscore the need to study them as distinct forms of violence vis-à-vis ethnic conflict and civil war.

What are the underlying causes of outbreaks of SoS conflict?

Definitional and conceptual issues aside, which factors contribute to the outbreak of SoS conflict? While there are undoubtedly innumerable variables at play, a recent survey of the literature on SoS conflict highlights the importance of the following core factors. While each of the below-noted factors can serve to fuel outbreaks of SoS conflict, these conflicts are much more likely to occur when these conditions coalesce.

 (1) Increased Economic Competition and Decline: Although the bulk of research on anti-immigrant sentiment is focused on Western democracies and international immigration, economic competition and decline serve to disproportionately heighten tensions between host-migrant populations in developing countries given their limited capacity to cope with scarcities and economic shocks. The breakdown of patronage networks — complex webs of patron-client relations operating in the political and economic realms — has contributed to triggering SoS conflict in parts of the Global South. When economic shocks result in the drying up of patronage resources, this can lead to the severing of patron-client relationships at the local level. This in turn intensifies economic competition and mobilises economically disgruntled local populations to violently turn against wealthier migrant populations who are perceived as wielding too much of the balance of (economic and political) power. This is precisely what contributed to outbreaks of SoS conflict in Côte d'Ivoire and Indonesia.

(2) Insecure and Unenforceable Property Rights Regimes: While the increased scarcity of land is often invoked in analyses on SoS conflict, it is the insecure and unenforceable nature of property rights regimes that frequently contribute to outbreaks of SoS conflicts, notably in places such as Sub-Saharan Africa. The communal land rights systems that have evolved from the colonial period have created fertile conditions for SoS conflicts by 'ethnicising' the ownership of land. The ethnicised, ambiguous and contested nature of property rights regimes enables political elites to mobilise supporters by instrumentalising land grievances, notably during electoral contests. As land ultimately has objective value (e.g. economic and/or military advantage) and subjective value (e.g. culture and identity), it often becomes a wedge issue and a source of much divide between migrants and locals.

(3) Political Liberalisation and Competitive Elections: The return of multi-party elections in the 1990s triggered a series of burning questions related to citizenship and the rights of SoS vis-à-vis migrants: Who can vote where? Who can run for office? And where can they run? These questions took on particular importance in areas where locals feared being outvoted by ever-increasing numbers of migrants, despite the fact that many of these migrants were citizens of the same state. Political entrepreneurs were thus able to mobilise electoral support and exclude political opponents by embracing nativistic language. The link between competitive elections and SoS conflict is not, however, unique to the Global South. For example, claims to 'autochthony' — the notion that certain groups have indigenous or ancestral rootedness in a particular territory and thus should have special privileges — have been employed in countries such as Belgium, France, and the Netherlands. In sum, electoral politics can provide powerful opportunities for SoS to reclaim their 'rightful' place in the hierarchy of power — often to the detriment of peace.

(4) Horizontal Inequalities: The concept of 'horizontal inequalities' (HI) has gained traction in recent years as a valuable framework for explaining outbreaks of violent group conflict. Central to the HI framework is the claim that conflicts among different identity groups are more likely to occur in contexts where both elites and supporters experience the coalescing of significant political, socio-economic and cultural grievances. Recent insights from East and Southeast Asia demonstrate that migrants to minority regions often enjoy greater political participation, cultural recognition, and access to economic and social resources than do local 'sons of the soil'. Not only are such groups considered to be 'dominant migrants' by virtue of the implicit and/or explicit support they receive from the state, but they are also members of the state's 'dominant ethnicity'. This confluence of factors can generate HIs that in turn heighten the possibility of outbreaks of SoS conflict.
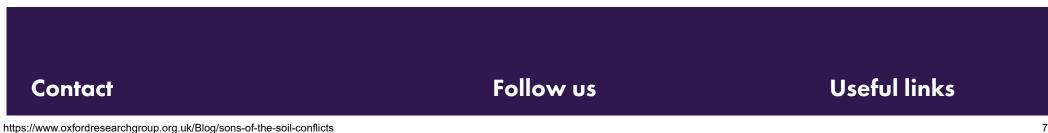
Concluding remarks

The global scale of SoS conflict highlights their significance for policymakers and scholars of international politics. Despite their seemingly localised nature, SoS conflicts are fundamentally embedded in global processes and often have global implications. The high profile conflict in Côte d'Ivoire provides a case in point. While decades of large-scale migration (both domestic and cross-border) into the country's cocoa region helped produce the 'Ivorian miracle' — a period of impressive economic growth and political stability — economic decline and the return to multi-party elections heightened the politics around identity and migration. The eventual outbreak of civil war in 2002 has ultimately been described as a war of 'who is who' with clear ties to the country's divisive history of migration.

The Ivorian example illustrates how SoS conflicts can quickly expand beyond their local contexts to threaten national and even regional peace. This can in turn fuel the exodus of huge volumes of refugees, require the creation of enormously costly United Nations peacekeeping operations, and trigger the involvement of the International Criminal Court. In short, while the terminology of such conflicts suggests localised preoccupations, the reality reveals their globalised dimensions. We thus overlook both the causes and consequences of SoS conflict at our peril. Rather than becoming a relic of the past, there is reason to believe they will continue to be a thorn in the side of precarious nation-building projects around the world.

Image credit: Oxfam East Africa/Flickr.

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